

When asbestos fibres are inhaled they can cause serious diseases which account for approximately 4000 deaths a year. The diseases include mesothelioma and lung cancer which are almost always fatal, asbestosis which is not always fatal and diffuse pleural thickening which is not fatal. The risk of developing these diseases, which take years to develop, is exacerbated by the length and intensity of the exposure to airborne asbestos fibres. There are three types of asbestos, white, blue and brown. They cannot be identified by colour and all types are dangerous.

Asbestos was used in a wide variety of products including fire protection and insulation in building materials manufactured prior to the year 2000; its use is now banned. Asbestos can be found in packing between floors and partition walls, sprayed limpet coverings, pipework and boiler lagging, sealants, rope seals and gaskets, insulating board and asbestos cement products used for roof cladding etc. Working on or near damaged asbestos containing materials could lead to inhaling fibres at levels many times higher than normal environmental levels. Fibres only become hazardous when they are released into the air through accidental damage or otherwise of the asbestos containing material. Fibres are not visible to the naked eye and are odourless. Workers most at risk are those who repair, refurbish or fit electrical and plumbing systems into buildings which were built or refurbished before the year 2000. The risk is higher when:

- Working on an unfamiliar site and when the site was built or refurbished before the year 2000
- When no checks for asbestos containing materials were made before work started
- The workers that may be exposed to asbestos fibres are smokers.

Most work with asbestos materials is carried out by contractors licensed by HSE who have specific training for licensed asbestos work, medical surveillance and appropriate personal protective equipment.



Best practice standards

✓	Before commencing building work, always ask for a plan of the building showing where asbestos containing materials may exist.
✓	Always stop and ask if you have suspicions that material may contain asbestos.
✓	Follow the plan of work for the job and use of the 'task guidance sheets' on the HSE asbestos microsite.
✓	Clean up as you go, make sure waste is double bagged and dispose of it at a licensed tip.
✓	Use your protective equipment and ensure your face mask fits properly. A special face mask may be necessary for certain work activities/environments.
✓	Do not create lots of dust, eg, by using power tools and sweep up using a Type H vacuum or wet rag.
✓	Do not take overalls home after asbestos work or reuse disposable clothing or PPE.
✓	Do not smoke or eat or drink in the work area. Wash before breaks and before leaving site for home.
✓	Managers must plan work to not disturb asbestos containing materials and should consider other work hazards. They should understand what work has to be carried out by contractors licensed by the HSE.
✓	Ensure all managers and operatives are appropriately trained and record training provided. Check training providers are competent and that they are aware of the work employees will carry out.
✓	Don't remove asbestos unnecessarily, removing it can be more dangerous than leaving it in place.
✓	Different asbestos materials present different risks and require different control measures.



Legal requirements

The Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 sets out the legal obligations on those engaged in asbestos work and also the responsibilities of 'Duty Holders' to manage asbestos in premises they are responsible for. Duty Holders must take appropriate steps, normally by conducting a premises survey, to locate exactly any asbestos in their building, how much there is and what condition it is in. In certain circumstances, for example where major demolition and refurbishment works are planned, it may be necessary to appoint a specialist surveyor competent in asbestos surveying to undertake a survey in advance. The results of the survey must be recorded and issued to people who may be exposed to or disturb the asbestos, including employees and contractors employed to undertake building works. All employees engaged in asbestos work must follow a work plan and have adequate training, instruction and supervision. Employers must prevent employees' exposure to asbestos or if not possible, reduce exposure as far as is reasonably practicable. If the control limit of 0.1 asbestos fibres per cubic centimeter of air measured (0.4 f/cm³) over 4 hours is breached, suitable masks must be provided to ensure exposure is brought below the control limit. Exposure over the control limit must result in work stopping until steps are taken to reduce exposure. There are exemptions that allow non-licensed operatives to work with asbestos when exposure is sporadic and of low intensity. The control limit for this type of non-licensed work is 0.6 asbestos fibres per cubic centimeter of air (0.6 f/cm³),

measured over a ten-minute period. Any work which is likely to result in exposures at or above this level cannot be considered to be sporadic and of low intensity and should therefore only be carried out by a licensed contractor. Whilst control limits are helpful in informing the level of risk, it should be appreciated that in civil liability cases, the Courts have shown an increasing tendency over the years in acknowledging that there are 'no safe limits' of exposure to asbestos and employers and/or duty holders must ensure work activities involving asbestos should be designed to be as far below the control limit as possible.

Guidance and useful information

- Approved Code of Practice Managing and Working with Asbestos L143 HSE Books
- Asbestos essentials task manual HSG210 HSE Books
- Selecting a Competent Surveyor: Asbestos: The Survey Guide (HSG264) HSE Books
- Asbestos: The Licensed Contractors Guide, HSG247, HSE Books

Further information

For more information please visit: www.QBEurope.com/rs or email us on RS@uk.qbe.com

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